

“Easier Heard Than Done”

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Text: James 1:19-27

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The drawings are as colorful and diverse as the people. Animals, crosses, flowers, spider webs, butterflies, demons, angels, stars, planets, flags, children, cars, trucks, motorcycles. Those are just a few of the images persons choose to have tattooed somewhere on their bodies. A study in the *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology* showed that about 24 percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 50 have at least one tattoo, up from 15 percent just three years ago. Thirty-six percent of those between 18 and 29 have a tattoo.

In a recent column (appeared in Tuesday's *Kansas City Star*), writer David Brooks commented on the proliferation of tattoos. "Pretty soon you'll go to the beach and find that only the most hardened non-conformists will be unmarked. Everybody else will be decorated with gothic-lettered AARP logos and Katie Couric 4-Ever tributes, and Democrats will have their Kerry-Edwards bumper stickers scratched across their backs so even their morticians will know which way they voted." Tattoos have entered the mainstream – to the delight of some and the disgust of others. There's even television shows now which depict tattoo life from the perspective of tattoo artists – "Inked" and "Miami Ink." The "Miami Ink" website lists these reasons for getting a tattoo and not getting one. Don't get a tattoo, it says, if you're (a) trying to fit in with new friends, (b) trying to impress current friends, (c) you're inebriated, or (d) the moon told you to. But, the site advises, do get a tattoo if you (a) want to, or (b) want to look cool, or (c) want to commemorate an event or loved one. Tattoos are one way something can be made permanent or long lasting. The author of the book of James talks about making something permanent – but he makes no mention of tattoos.

It is probably helpful to remind ourselves that:

- Tradition has attributed this New Testament book to James, brother of Jesus, but most scholars have doubts about his authorship. It's remarkable how little explicit Christian teaching the book of James contains. There's only two references to Jesus – it relies more on Old Testament figures and examples. James really qualifies as Christian wisdom literature.
- In this passage, James acknowledges God as the source of all and then turns to practical religion – how persons are to conduct themselves as individual Christians and as a community of faith.
- "Be doers of the word and not hearers only." Don't just hear the Word – the Word of God, the message of Christ – do the word.
- Faith must not be passive, but active.
- There's an intriguing reference to a mirror. To be a hearer and not a doer is like a person who looks at their reflection in the mirror and walks away and forgets it.

The Gospel message will be forgotten or lost if not acted upon. If we hear and don't act, we will forget. If we hear and act, then we will remember. That knowledge will be made permanent. James goes even further in chapter two and says, "Faith without works is dead." Did you hear that? For faith to be real, to be alive – to be made a permanent long lasting indelible part of who we are – that faith must be translated into deeds. The gospel's power is lost if there's a discrepancy between what we hear and what we do. It's almost as if our faith is like a washable tattoo when we hear the word – that it only becomes a lifetime part of us when there is action involved. Knowing what to do is not as important as doing what we know. "Be doers of the word and not hearers only."

What kind of critique does that bring to bear on us as Christians? As a congregation? "Be doers of the word." Are we comforted or convicted by that statement? We're told by psychologists that to really know someone – I mean really know someone – don't worry so much about what someone hears or says, but it's what they do that speaks volumes. Now assuming that because we're here, we're hearers of the word, are we doers?

In the context of the community of faith, what are we to do? What are the expectations? I've suggested to you before that I believe there are several things a congregation can expect from its members and that members can expect of the congregation.

A. Attendance. I believe the congregation can expect its members to be regular and faithful in their attendance, and members can expect worship experiences that are faithful, meaningful, and which bring us into God's presence. Our worship ministry and praise teams are committed to doing just that. Yes, we can appreciate the beauty of nature and revel in God's presence at other places on Sunday morning, but my experience has been that that's not what we're thinking about when we're somewhere else, and we can't be a contributing part of the body of Christ if we're not with the rest of the body. That's like saying we can be a good brother or sister without having any contact with our siblings. We have brothers and sisters right here whom we need and who need us.

B. Bring Financial Gifts. The stewardship of our financial resources is an important part of being a doer of the word. I would expect members to return to God a portion of their blessings through giving to the church. We have seen an increase in giving this year – and I believe our 33 Days of Stewardship emphasis last fall is part of the reason. I commend you for your stewardship. I thank you for your stewardship – and I encourage you to continue to grow in that stewardship. You can expect that our congregation will be a responsible steward of those gifts and that is certainly the case – not only with our general operating budget but also with our other assets and investments. Our trustees and our stewardship and finance ministries take very seriously their responsibilities to be the best steward of the church's resources.

C. Contributing Your Spiritual Gifts. I believe the congregation can expect its members to utilize their spiritual gifts for the benefit of a ministry to others. As we highlighted in our spiritual gifts study last fall, each of us has at least one spiritual gift, and that gift can be used to enrich our life together. In turn, members can expect the congregation's leadership to assist and guide persons in discovering their spiritual gifts and helping them find places to use those gifts. That's why we have been intentional this year in structuring our ministry to allow opportunities for folk to get involved in specific ministries for which they have a passion and gifts. That's why we've been highlighting "Ministry Opportunities" on our display board downstairs in the entryway. We're going to be making some changes with that display so that it's more accessible and noticeable, but we're hopeful that you will seek it out to learn about ways you can utilize your gifts. The nominating committee will also be functioning within the next month to begin securing elder and deacon leadership for next year. This is not "filling slots" – we want to emphasize gifts and being called to a particular ministry. All of us have a gift and all gifts are important.

D. Discipline – personal devotion and study and corporate learning. We want to encourage our members to have an active spiritual life – to take time for prayer and reflection and study of the Scriptures. The congregation seeks to provide opportunities for members to grow in the spiritual disciplines. As you noticed in the latest newsletter, we have an abundance of those opportunities this fall – a new children's ministry program beginning September 17, Kids on the Move. Learning, Turning, and Reflecting; a college Bible study begins next Wednesday; our Bible study and fellowship meals begin that same night. Next Sunday, Koinonia class will begin a new study, "Living The Questions," focusing on how one can have a faith with integrating in the midst of the ambiguity we all face. Bethany Class will be exploring the idea of covenant. Discussion class is continuing their study of when "Bad Christians Happen to Good People" – how to repair damage when Christians hurt each other. We have a prayer retreat scheduled for November 3-4. It's called "A Taste of Silence" – designed to provide an opportunity for extended silence, rest, and prayer. This retreat is our chance to do – to be active – to grow in our spiritual lives by taking time to be silent. I guarantee you that you will benefit greatly from participating. I'll even give you a money back guarantee. If you participate in this Silent Prayer Retreat and don't find it to be a great experience, I will personally refund your \$35.00. Don't let these opportunities for spiritual growth go by without taking advantage of them. A – Attendance, B – Bring Your Own Gifts, C – Contributing Your Spiritual Gifts, D – Discipline.

E. Evangelism. I believe members can be expected to share the message of Christ with others – to talk about our faith with someone else – to reach outside our membership and invite someone to worship – to reach within our membership and contact someone we haven't seen lately and tell them they've been missed. The congregation will in turn strive to be a welcoming community of faith – a place that practices radical hospitality, so that when someone new or inactive is in our midst, they feel accepted and welcomed and included. Our core clusters continue to organize and improve communication to get better connected.

Now have you been noticing all those doing words? Attend – Bring – Contribute – Pray – Study – Reflect – Invite – Welcome. We must be doers – as individuals and as a community of faith.

William Willemon, a pastor and teacher once said:

Sometimes I have heard people say of church on Sunday morning, “I think of church as a filling station. I come here empty, and during the service I get filled so I can make it through the week.” See? Passive, receptive, not active. It makes church into a place where we come, sit back and say, “OK, preacher, choir, organist, . . . fill me up.”

No. The test for good worship, the mark of a good church is not what we do here, during the hour of worship, It’s what we do outside those doors for the rest of the week. Yet here, as elsewhere, after all is said and done, more is said than done.

The world is quite right in judging the truth of the gospel on the basis of the sort of lives the gospel is able to produce. Do we really look like the God whom we praise here on Sunday morning? Have our songs and prayers changed us, made us into that which we profess? That is the test, says James.

And we already know that. We know that any sermon which is “seen,” in deeds of love and justice, is more effective than one which is only spoken and heard. How many people have been turned off with the church, have gone away from Jesus, because they have been hurt or scandalized by the actions or lack of action on the part of those who profess to follow Jesus?

So the sermon ends. The test for the sermon, the mark of whether or not this was a “good” sermon, a “good” service of worship, is about to come upon us. You already agree with the sermon. You already understand the biblical text for today. . . . It’s a freebie. Agreement, understanding are not the problem. The issue is now before us, now for the final question: what will we do with that which we have said, sung, and heard?

“Pastor, that was a wonderful sermon,” said the parishioner at the door after the service.

“That remains to be seen,” said the preacher.